News release

Construction firms at mercy of weather

30 May 2002

Construction companies in the UK think the British weather is getting worse, making planning and executing projects more difficult, according to new research from the Met Office.

A new survey reveals that nearly all construction firms cite weather problems, such as delays causing lost man-hours, as being more troublesome than problems with suppliers, labour or planning issues.

They are worried that worsening weather conditions in the UK are exacerbating the problem. More than half say that they are increasingly suffering from the effects of the weather on their business, while a quarter have had to change their working practices over the last few years due to what they perceive as poorer weather conditions.

Martin Rodgers, Head of the Met Office's services to the construction industry, has 15 years' experience of this sector. He said: "The research highlights that while firms are aware that the weather is a major problem, they don't think they can do anything about it. Yet by planning around the weather, using site-specific forecasts, they could cut costs and gain a competitive edge.

"The British weather is variable to say the least, sometimes changing from one hour to the next. As such, it affects all parts of the industry, from house builders who can't put up bricks and mortar when it's raining, to those erecting steel and concrete constructions in high temperatures - as the cooling steel contracts it may crack the concrete. Severe cold can also affect the strength of concrete, and high winds prohibit the use of tower cranes on major building sites.

"A simple five-day forecast, sent by fax or text-message, would let house builders know not to build external walls if it is set to rain, giving them advance notice to plan their work for indoors instead. Building sites would also know when to hire the tower cranes rather than leaving them unused in bad conditions. For major construction sites like Heathrow Terminal 5 or the Birmingham relief road, a weather forecaster is also only a phone call away, providing more tailored advice."

The Met Office research reveals that it is not just rain that construction companies have to worry about. High winds, snow, frost and extremes in temperature (both high and low) can all play their part in disrupting a project.

The Met Office survey of firms, including road, industrial and residential construction companies, also found that:

- nearly 60% of firms said the weather impacted quite seriously on their business but only 17% took weather into account as a vital part of planning - a quarter didn't take it into account at all
- 58% only use weather information during a project, not before
- 50% allow a time contingency in programming for weather-related delays, but the majority estimate or guess the time they should allow. Only 43% of those who estimate the time use weather information for this purpose
- a quarter of those questioned experienced problems such as concrete being ruined by frost up to five times a year. One in 10 encountered problems up to 100 times a year, and one in 20 more than 100 times in the past 12 months. The average across the industry is 26 weather-related problems a year
- 21% lost 11-20 work days as a result of weather-related delays in the past 12 months, and a further 16% lost up to 50 days
- only a quarter recognised the benefits of forecast information to help minimise the effect of weather on their business - and, despite the fact they're worried weather conditions will worsen, two thirds of those questioned say their use of weather information won't change

Rodgers concludes: "There is already some evidence that climate change is leading to more adverse weather in the UK, a trend that is likely to continue. Our forecasting capabilities mean that businesses are much more able to work around the weather."

Notes

Met Office services to building and construction firms include:

- MetFAX - regional forecasts for the next five days by fax to enable firms to use their resources more effectively
- MetWEB- a full range of products online, which are suitable for both regular and occasional users
- Downtime Summaries - essential data for monitoring building sites and allowing quick settlement of contractual disputes
- NEC Monthly Summaries - contain all the monthly weather information required to satisfy NEC specifications.

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